MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

HANSARD WATT

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MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

JAQUES: More! I prithee, more.
AMIENS: My voice is ragged; I know I cannot
please you.
JAQUES: I do not desire you to please me; I do
desire you to sing.

As You Like It.

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

BY HANSARD WATT

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NOTE

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866727

TO

J. W. G.

AND

E. W. D.

PREFACE

There may be some who, if constrained to look
Within the covers of this little book,
Shall, seeing verses, shut it with a snap,
And, flinging it aside, remark, "Poor chap!"
"Why is it people waste their time," they say,
"In this abysmal, idiotic way?
If they have any worthy tale to tell,
How A. or B. set forth, and what befell,
How this one play'd his little part in life,
Or that one woo'd a not unwilling wife,
Why not proclaim their puppets' joys or woes
In sober and unsentimental prose?"
Such people think, and doubtless they are right,
That minor poets should be shot at sight;
But are they, when they advocate these views,
Aware how many trifle with the Muse?

PREFACE

A few there be who, now and then, by dint
Of perseverance win their way to print ;
But then for each so chosen there must be
Ten thousand scribbling in obscurity !
Vain, therefore, to destroy the printed few—
So incomplete a cure would never do ;
The ranks, diminished only for a time,
Would fill again with champions of rhyme,
Who with their latest and expiring breath
Would hail with song their swift approaching
death !

There is no cure. We bards can never die :
What none demand we ever must supply ;
Our careful couplets we will fondly link
So long as there are fountain pens and ink ;
Unceasing we pursue our fancies' flight,
Collect what little thoughts we have—and write,
And with sublime indiff'rence never heed
The fact that none (save our relations) read !

What saith the adage? That must be endured
Which can by no expedient be cured !

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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF PHARAOH

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF PHARAOH

And what did chaps like Pharaoh do?
A child I once was talking to
  Inopportunely asked;
And luckily enough for me
There was no adult near to see
  My ignorance unmasked.

I never think it wise to show
That there are things I do not know
  When speaking to the young,
And so I tried to feel at ease
While wayward guesses such as these
  Slipped glibly from my tongue.

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

You ask how Pharaoh spent his days,
In what variety of ways
  His time was occupied?
Then listen: He arose at nine,
And, if it chanced the day were fine,
  He breakfasted outside.

Though richly bless'd with worldly goods,
No patent pre-digested foods
  Were to his table borne;
Content with what was close at hand,
He broke his fast, I understand,
  Exclusively on corn.

From Joseph, as you may have read,
The country had inherited
  A plentiful supply,
And "Corn in Egypt," thanks to him,
Has since become a synonym
  For wealth and luxury.

This labour done, his next would be
To view the spacious Factory,
  Wherein with joy he saw
In each dim cell some five or six
Unhappy Hebrews making bricks
  With insufficient straw.

Two pleasant hours would thus be spent
With every symptom of content,
  So gladsome was the sight ;
And as his homeward way he took,
The oft-repeated backward look
  Betokened his delight.

Till lunch-time he would then repose,
Stretched out upon the roof, and doze
  Or watch the placid Nile,
In safety contemplating thus
The cheerful hippopotamus
  And crafty crocodile.

And if the sun with scorching ray
Smote heavy on him as he lay,
  Obedient to his glance
Two trembling slaves on either hand
Enthusiastically fanned
  His heated countenance.

His lunch was scant and over soon ;
His programme for the afternoon
  Would always be the same ;
The hours succeeding his repast
Were sacred to that everlast-
  ing Royal and Antient game !

This statement is on knowledge based,
For golf in every age is traced
  By sure connecting links,
And ancient tablets I have seen,
Show Cheops "On the seventh green,"
  Or "Bunkered by the Sphinx!"

Two rounds, and then he would forsake
His cleek, and with reluctance make
  Another kind of tea ;
Whereafter pressing State affairs
Would plunge him in a sea of cares
  And dull despondency.

Precisely on the stroke of nine
He set aside his work to dine,
  Of melancholy rid ;
And Hebrew authors oft repeat
These simple words : "The King *did* eat,"
  With accent on the "did."

A game of draughts might then begin
With some one who forebore to win
  At peril of his head,
And such I deem a sample day
Which well entitled him to say,
  Like Pepys : "And so to bed !"

BUSIRIS

BUSIRIS

When King Busiris made a joke,
  However puerile or crude,
His wit was certain to evoke
  The plaudits of the multitude.
(For any one who failed to laugh
Was generally torn in half.)

It has been proved beyond a doubt,
  As certain ancient records tell,
That in his day a dismal drought
  Upon the land of Egypt fell.
Nine weary years were spent in vain
Entreaty for a shower of rain!

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

The Nile, beneath a torrid sky,
A simple streamlet had become;
The monarch's wit itself ran dry,
And jokes were at a premium.
The few he ventured on might not
Inaptly be described "dry rot"!

A famine followed, for the land
Refused its wonted crops to bear;
The common people fed on sand,
The King had little better fare.
He lived on butter sparsely spread
On crusts of Aerated Bread!

It happened that one afternoon
A certain stranger passing by
Was heard to say that he could soon
The needed remedy supply.
"Conduct me to the King," quoth he,
"If food and water you would see."

Oh, what a tumult then was heard !
  They bore him breathless to the throne ;
Their future hung upon the word
  Of this deliverer unknown.
So great a silence fell on all
That men distinctly heard it fall !

"O King," he said, "most mighty lord,
  Thy troubles soon may have an end,
Speak but the necessary word,
  And rain in plenty shall descend.
Scorn not a sage's sound advice
But make a *human sacrifice!*"

"So let it be," the King replied ;
  "My people shall no longer thirst,
Since you such counsel have supplied
  You surely shall be offered *first!*
So may you win an honoured name
And merit everlasting fame !"

If any word the victim spoke
  It fell unheeded in the cheers
Which heralded the only joke
  The King had made for seven years!
And, later, they renewed their mirth
When rain refreshed the weary earth.

RHAMSINITUS

RHAMSINITUS

Let us sing of Rhamsinitus,
Ancient Egypt's miser king,
For his story will delight us
(Which is mainly why we sing):
Know that he amassed a treasure
Greater far than he could count,
Nor could any process measure
The amount.

So he built a Safe Deposit
For the storing of his gold,
Of gigantic size (because it
Had such quantities to hold).

Strong it seemed past all believing ;
No one could deceit expect,
Saving only the deceiving
Architect.

He, a man supremely gifted
With the wisdom of his race,
Knew a stone which could be shifted
From a certain vital place.
Which contrivance, I may mention,
As was later clearly shown,
Was a criminal invention
Of his own.

Often would this schemer cunning
Thither wend his guilty flight,
Seven times a week go running
In the watches of the night !
And when there his person artful
Through the aperture would squeeze,
Gold abstracting by the cartful
At his ease.

Thus in course of time acquiring
  Riches scaling many tons,
He, when finally expiring,
  Left the secret to his sons,
Who, continuing to profit
  By the monarch's boundless store,
Made a handsome living off it
  As before.

This went on until the practice
  Dawned upon the greedy King,
Who (the melancholy fact is)
  Swore at once like anything!
Flew into a purple passion
  Born of impotent despair,
And, as was the current fashion,
  Tore his hair.

Seven weeks he sat in ashes
  With a look which seemed to say:
"Tell me where my stolen cash is—
  Who has taken it away?"

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

Scores of overpaid magicians
  Followed every kind of clue,
But, though many their suspicions,
  Facts were few !

Roused at last from his inaction,
  Rhamsinitus racked his brain,
Till a gleam of satisfaction
  Overspread his face again :
He would be his own detective,
  And the robbers' cunning meet
With a plan at once effective
  And complete.

Furnished with a goodly number
  Of the strongest kind of gins,
Calculated to encumber
  An intruding stranger's shins,
He established them in places
  Where the treasure-chamber bore
Faint incriminating traces
  On its floor !

Came the brothers unsuspecting,
When the pall of night was spread,
With the object of collecting
Fresh supplies of daily bread.
In they clambered, softly lighting
On the flagstones underneath,
Just escaping the inviting
Rows of teeth.

In the darkness deftly groping
Soon the younger filled his sack,
And was stealthily eloping
With his burden on his back,
When, by some mischance or other,
An inevitable trap
Suddenly ingulfed his brother
With a snap!

Not a groan escaped the victim,
Not a single angry word
'Gainst the man who had thus tricked him
In the silence could be heard.

"Shame and death," he said, "await me,
For the evil I have done;
Draw your sword—decapitate me—
And begone.

"When they come, these plotters clever,
And a headless captive view,
They will be as far as ever
From obtaining any clue.
Therefore leave my body where it
Well may fill them with dismay,
But remove my head and bear it
Far away."

This his brother did, admitting
That the stratagem was wise,
Tears of sorrow, as was fitting,
Streaming from his downcast eyes.
Then into the night emerging
Home he took his way again,
Schemes for retribution surging
In his brain.

Certain he was now in sight of
A significant success,
Rhamsinitus passed a night of
Quite unwonted wakefulness.
Wherefore it is not surprising,
Lacking as he did repose,
That what time the sun was rising
He, too, rose.

With his mind on vengeance centred,
To his treasure-house he sped,
Opened wide the door and entered,
Staggered back discomfited!
And he surely must be pitied
In his overwhelming grief,
He, a king, to be outwitted
By a thief!

Home he fled as one who dashes
To a dentist when in pain,
Ordered fresh supplies of ashes,
Rent his raven locks again.

Which supreme humiliation
  Bred ere many hours had passed
Just as good an inspiration
  As the last.

"Doubtless," so he argued, "dozens
  Of his relatives will come,
Uncles, aunts, and second cousins,
  Some alone—in parties some:
And if these shall see him lying
  In his present parlous state,
They will not refrain from sighing
  At his fate."

So he hung the mutilated
  Body to the outer wall,
Adequately elevated
  Where it could be seen by all.
Kept by trusted guards and daring,
  With instructions to arrest
Any passer-by whose bearing
  Seemed depressed!

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

Lo ! an aged merchant passes,
  Driving in a single line
Seven heavy-laden asses
  Bearing skins of ruby wine !
Suddenly a mighty rushing
  Rouses him as from a dream
Out the wine pours in a gushing,
  Crimson stream !

Which phenomenon perceiving,
  Every guard forsook his post,
One and all their duty leaving
  Joined each other in a toast.
Ripping open every skinful
  To the owner's deep distress,
Till they lay in senseless, sinful
  Drunkenness !

But the merchant, showing traces
  Of a strange, ecstatic glee,
Shaved one side of all their faces
  With supreme dexterity !

Not a single right-hand whisker
That escaped his razor keen :
Never, surely, was a brisker
Barber seen !

Next with fitting care he laid them
Heel to head and side by side,
Murmuring, as he survey'd them
With a pardonable pride,
"Fast asleep you lie, yet faster
Shall your slumber be, I fear,
When that cunning king, your master,
Finds you here !"

Then the thief (he was none other
Than our treasure-seeking friend)
Cut the cords which bound his brother,
Caused his body to descend.
Very skilfully he caught it
Ere it fell upon the ground,
And in triumph homeward brought it
Safe and sound !

When this sorry situation
He had leisure to digest,
Rage succumbed to admiration
In the monarch's manly breast.
Pardon to the thief he tendered
Per the *Memphis Weekly Times*,
And forgot the loss engendered
By his crimes.

So the robber made confession,
Telling everything he knew,
Being under the impression
It would pay him so to do.
Whereupon he was rewarded
With a fair princess's hand,
And exalted rank accorded
In the land.

Covered thus with gilded glory
We will bid him fond farewell;
Trusting only that the story
We have humbly tried to tell

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

May be found a source of pleasure
  And a satisfaction bring
More enduring than the treasure
  Of the King!

CYRUS

CYRUS

No man of learning will dispute
  What History has handed down,
That Cyrus loved his silver flute
  More dearly than his golden crown.
When not engaged in State affairs
He played the most entrancing airs.

And once while strolling by the sea
  There came to him the sudden wish
To test his great ability
  Upon the unoffending fish.
He thought it probable that they
Would come ashore to hear him play.

He piped his most seductive strain,
And swept the sea with eager glance,
Piped all the tunes he knew, in vain!
The fish were not inclined to dance.
In deep disgust the monarch rose
And brought his concert to a close.

A week elapsed, and back he went,
Still harbouring intense regret,
And lo! two fishermen, intent
On taking herring from a net;
They whistled merrily the while
Their hours of labour to beguile.

The monarch looked and rubbed his eyes,
Such wonder did the sight afford,
For with unparalleled surprise
He saw the fish with one accord
Leaping and dancing on the sand
(As fishes do when brought to land).

"Ho! ho!" he cried, "these wretched slaves
  Need whistle but a bar or two,
And fish by hundreds leave the waves
  Which for myself they would not do.
Now by the throne which I adorn
'Twere better they had not been born!"

Then swiftly from his robe he took
  His silver flute and struck an air,
The fishermen turned round to look,
  And trembled, seeing who was there.
And then they heard his mandate ring:
"Dance, villains!" roared the angry King.

And dance they did with main and might,
  Revolving, leaping to and fro,
Hour after hour till fall of night
  They tripped the light fantastic toe.
Nor was it till they fainting fell
That Cyrus cried: "Enough! 'Tis well."

NECHO

NECHO

Six days did Necho, King of Egypt, think,
Refusing either nourishment or drink ;
Then, having thoroughly matured his plans,
Commanded : " Bring me some Phœnicians ! "

To whom : " Good Mariners," the monarch said,
" Unending glory shall on you be shed,
If round this Libya you make a trip,
And circumnavigate it in a ship."

" Great Pharaoh," they made answer, " we obey,
Nor do thy servants feel the least dismay."
Then, eager for the quest, they hoisted sail,
South-wafted by a favourable gale.

Their progress for a time was passing good,
Yet as the months went by their stock of food
Grew daily, to their infinite distress,
"Fine by degrees, and beautifully less!"

Perceiving which they were constrained to land,
Against their will, on Afric's barren strand;
Much seed they scattered, nor set sail again
Until they gathered in the golden grain.

Three years they journey'd, and thrice reaped
their corn,
Yet were their easy tempers little worn;
Southward they sailed, then westward with the
sun,
Then north and east and lo! their task was
done.

King Necho met them in the homeward reach,
And gave them greeting as they press'd the
beach,
Plied them with eager questioning if they
Had witnessed any wonder by the way?

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

"O King," they cried, "in wisdom unexcell'd,
One great and solemn wonder we beheld;
For in a distant corner of this land
Thy servants saw *the sun on their right hand!*"

"Impossible," the King replied; "you rave,
Good sailors though you be and passing brave."
Whereat th' intrepid mariners bent low,
Yet still persisted: "It was even so!"

"Some vices," said the King, "may have their
cure,
But boasting liars I will not endure;
Let these," he ordered, "instantly be slain,
Lest haply they should live to lie again!"

CRŒSUS

CRŒSUS

Now Crœsus was the kind of King
  Who took the greatest care,
When he was doing anything,
  No matter what or where,
To see that he was more or less
Assured of ultimate success.

Pre-eminently this was so
  Ere he to battle went,
He took the greatest pains to know
  The probable event:
Consulting oracles to see
If they could promise victory.

And very early in his reign
  He organised a test,
By which he hoped to ascertain
  What oracle was best.
Some twenty shrines there may have been,
And competition thus was keen.

Selecting, therefore, twenty men,
  He sent a man to each ;
He told them what to say, and when
  To make their little speech.
"At noon on Saturday!" he cried,
"Ask how the King is occupied!"

The day arrived, the monarch sought
  An underground retreat ;
"No one can see me here," he thought,
  "My ambush is complete."
And then he set himself to do
The most unlikely thing he knew.

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

A young and tender lamb he got,
  And boiled it, wool and all;
Inserting, as he stirred the pot,
  One tortoise, cut up small.
"The one that fathoms this," cried he,
"Shall be the oracle for me!"

The messengers returned and made
  Each man his own reply;
Yet only one of them display'd
  The least sagacity.
At Delphi, to the King's delight,
The local Zancig answered right!

You may (and doubtless will) believe
  This tale to be untrue;
I shall not personally grieve
  If you adopt that view.
Indeed, I hasten to express
My own complete distrustfulness!

CAMBYSES

CAMBYSES

Cambyses, one of Persia's kings,
  Resembled Nero in his ways,
Rejoicing much in torturings
  And murders on alternate days.
Supreme delight he could derive
From prisoners interr'd alive!

Yet no one ventured to protest
  Or grumble at the monarch's fun,
The populace kept silence, lest
  By speaking they should be undone,
Till Crœsus to remonstrate came
And boldly dared to cry "For shame!"

"Preach not to me," Cambyses said;
"Your words convince me not at all."
The nimble Crœsus ducked his head—
The arrow quivered in the wall;
And ere another could be sent
The human target rose and went.

And yet, though something fleet of limb,
Not long protracted was the chase,
Swift messengers surrounded him
And clasped him in a tight embrace.
It was, they said, Cambyses' will
That, having captured, they should kill!

But if, they argued, morning came
And brought repentance to their lord,
Instead of meriting his blame
They might receive a rich reward
If they their captive could display
As sound as when he ran away.

And even so it came to pass,
  Cambyses mourned his hasty act,
He rent his garments till, alas!
  No single thread remained intact.
(A habit which the Persians had
Whenever they were feeling sad.)

Great therefore was his joy to find
  His regal guest alive and well,
Delight and gratitude combined
  His former sorrow to expel;
Yet on his servants standing by
He cast but a revengeful eye.

Nor had they leisure long to quake,
  For, with their feet securely bound,
Within the ornamental lake
  He had them severally drowned.
Thus proving how unwise a thing
  It was to disobey the King!

POLYCRATES

POLYCRATES

When long ago the world was young,
  And Golf and Vanguards were unknown,
When Ancient Britons ranked among
  The products of an Age of stone,
There dwelt awhile in Samos' Isle
A King who wore a chronic smile!

Polycrates, of whom I sing,
  The hero of this ancient myth,
Had doubtless been as good a King
  If he had borne the name of Smith;
As Jones or Brown, his gilded crown
Would have secured him like renown.

But I digress. This worthy man
  Was prosperous in all he did,
His bank account was vaster than
  The vastest kind of pyramid.
He simply rolled in wealth untold
And wallowed in excess of gold!

Now Amasis of Egypt viewed
  Success so uniformly great
With such extreme disquietude
  As made him grow disconsolate.
His appetite was put to flight
And sleepless was his couch at night!

But seeing that they were allied
  He planned and plotted night and day
To stem the force of Fortune's tide,
  Or make it flow some other way.
Luck so unending must portend
(He argued) an abysmal end.

And so one day, while in the thick
  Of onerous affairs of State,
Polycrates received a brick
  Presented on a golden plate.
"A letter!" he remarked, "for me;
From whom, I wonder, can it be?"

A letter? Yes, for be it known
  That in that dim and distant day
Men wrote with chisels upon stone
  And sculptured all they had to say.
The skilful dint on polished flint
Was more enduring far than print.

The library was not the spot
  For those who liked to choose and pick,
Since novels of the time were not
  Unlike so many tons of brick.
The very few there were on view
Gave readers quite enough to do.

But to resume. Polycrates
  Perused his letter to the end ;
The pictures did not seem to please,
  But manifestly to offend.
Herodotus has given us
A somewhat free translation—thus :

"Polycrates, if tales are true
  Concerning all that you possess,
I needs must take a dismal view
  Of such extravagant success.
For wealth so vast and made so fast
Must bring catastrophe at last!

"A remedy I would suggest,
  A simple if a painful plan :
Select what thing you value best
  And lose it, where the hand of man
Can never more its form restore
However deeply it explore.

"And if my friendship you would keep,
Fear not to make this timely stitch,
That so you may not live to reap
The fruits of that good fortune which
I frankly thirst to see reversed—
Yours truly, AMASIS I."

Although inclined to take offence,
Polycrates could not deny
That counsel from a man of sense
Should be obeyed implicitly.
The danger might perhaps be slight,
But what if Amasis were right!

Persuaded, then, the plan was sound
As coming from a friendly King,
He searched his collar-drawer and found
A large and lustrous ruby ring.
Then mournfully he put to sea,
As ill at ease as he could be.

The gem was sunk ten fathoms deep,
  And disappeared from mortal gaze.
The King refused to eat or sleep
  For seventeen successive days.
Nor bite nor sup nor foaming cup
Had any power to cheer him up.

And now a knocking grim and great,
  Delivered by no trembling hand,
Was heard upon the palace gate
  (The tradesman's entrance, understand).
A man was there whose frenzied air
Betokened some occurrence rare.

A fisherman he was by trade
  Who now exhibiting his prize
Before the astonished cook displayed
  A turbot of gigantic size ;
A fish whose weight I hesitate
To guess or even estimate.

"Though poor," he said, "I gladly bring
The fruit of this my record cast,
That haply it may tempt the King
To break his long-protracted fast."
Which said, he went away content
With pence and much advertisement.

The cook, assisted by his wife
Whose aid he had petitioned for,
Attacked the turbot with his knife,
And lo! in its interior—
(Words scarce convey what I would say)
The monarch's ring uninjured lay!

And then and there and as he was
That cook ran headlong to the King,
Exceeding jubilant because
He was the finder of the ring.
He deemed his lord would well reward
The man who had his gem restored!

The monarch gave a startled cry,
  And then his face grew still more sad;
He sooner would have said good-bye
  To every other ring he had
Than bear the pain and mental strain
Of seeing this one back again.

"Alas!" he cried, "who can deny
  That mine is but a sorry state?
One cannot alter Destiny
  Or wage a winning war with Fate!
And it were vain to strive again
Or open up a new campaign."

Though I of course could tell you how
  Polycrates was doomed to die,
Such details matter little now
  And make but dismal history.
Enough to say that from that day
He view'd the future with dismay!

Not so the fisherman who sold
The turbot to the palace cook.
Above his shop some words of gold,
Well seen by all who cared to look,
Announced that he henceforth would be
"PURVEYOR TO HIS MAJESTY!"

DARIUS

DARIUS

The curious with one accord
  Made haste to throng the public square,
For King Darius, Persia's lord,
  Was holding Quarter Sessions there.
He had before him at the time
  (By various accusers led)
A certain man to whom the crime
  Of murder was attributed.

Darius, having heard them all,
  Both prosecution and defence,
Condemned the luckless criminal
  On circumstantial evidence.

And since a trifling sprain debarr'd
Himself from walking much about,
He sent the Captain of his Guard
To see the sentence carried out.

Now, as they neared the place of death
They saw one running from afar,
Begrim'd with dust and scant of breath,
Yet generally jocular.
"I am the murdered man," he cried,
"And ample evidence can bring
To prove that I have never died—
Come back and let us tell the King!"

So back they gladly went and gained
A further hearing of the case;
The Captain of the Guard explained
Precisely what had taken place.
Yet all his fine forensic skill
No pity in the King awoke,
Who, rising, bade the Court be still
And thus his final judgment spoke:

MYTHS ABOUT MONARCHS

"Oh, Persians, hearken unto me
And hear how justice shall be done:
Three executions shall you see
In place of your expected one.
The prisoner must surely die,
Because a Persian monarch's word,
Once pledged, can not be altered by
Events which may have since occurr'd.

"The man-at-arms who disobeys
Instructions definite and clear,
The price of such rebellion pays
By terminating his career!
Let, then, this Captain of the Guard
Henceforth be numbered with the dead,
Nor can we deem the sentence hard
Which parts his body from his head!"

Then last the man reported slain
Was sent to join the other two;
"Your crime," the King observed, "is plain—
These people owe their deaths to you!

For had you never lived," he cried,
"This hapless pair had now been free,
This case would never have been tried
Nor soiled the page of History!"

THE SACRED CHICKENS

THE SACRED CHICKENS

Before a Roman risked a fight
With any foreign naval foe,
He deemed it prudent to invite
The aid of Neptune, Mars and Co.;
And as the Gods approved or banned
He put to sea or stayed on land.]

Attached to every Roman fleet
Were Chickens, sacred from their birth,
And victory or dire defeat
(With corresponding gloom or mirth)
Depended only on the mood
In which the Chickens faced their food!

For if with normal appetite
They fell upon each fresh supply,
The omens were considered bright
And indicated victory.
But if the fowls refused to eat,
A battle simply meant defeat!

The story I shall now relate
Concerns a certain Consul who,
Though seemingly unfortunate,
If all we hear of him is true,
Was none the less a man of grit
And furnished with a ready wit.

"To-night," he said, "we will surprise
The Carthage fleet in yonder bay"—
The Roman navy rubbed its eyes
In wonder mingled with dismay.
The night was dark, their ships were few,
And numbered less than one to two!

And while with soft persuasive word
They sought to set his plan aside,
The Chicken-Keeper's voice was heard,
That voice which could not be denied:
"O Consul, do not court defeat,
The Sacred Chickens will not eat!"

Mere words could not ambition quell,
Nor omens make that Consul shrink;
"They will not eat, you say. 'Tis well,
Then let the stupid creatures drink;"
And, laughing with a fiendish glee,
He hurled them all into the sea!

The Chickens sank. The briny wave
For ever stemmed their appetite;
The sporting Consul shared their grave
A little later in the night.
And Carthage sent the message home—
"Sensational defeat of Rome!"

TO THE CRITIC

TO THE CRITIC

My task is done, and I have but to learn
  Your verdict and my own uncertain fate ;
  Then, gentle critic, do not hesitate
Th' expectant poet's gratitude to earn.
Does not your kindly heart within you burn
  To prove to me your wisdom, while I wait
  With breathless eagerness to hear you state
What little excellence you may discern ?

Give, then, your verdict ; tell me here and now
  If it be good or ill, abuse or praise :
To your impartial ruling I must bow,
  And needs must weep if you condemn my lays.
Shall sombre sackcloth press my pensive brow,
  Or verdant and imperishable bays ?

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